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Editores/Organizadores

Agnaldo Rodrigues da Silva  
Taisir Mahmudo Karim

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Ricelli Justino dos Reis

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Av. Tancredo Neves, 1095 - Cavalhada - Cáceres MT - Brasil - 78200000  
Tel: 65 3221-0023 - revistaecos.unemat@gmail.com



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Av. Tancredo Neves, 1095 - Cavalhada - Cáceres - MT - Brasil - 78200000

Fone/Fax 65 3221-0023 - www.unemat.br - editora@unemat.br

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# **REVISTA ECOS**

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ECOS

TEXTOS EM PORTUGUÊS/INGLÊS



PORTUGUESE DRAMA AND THE DIALECT OF  
 ENLIGHTENMENT:  
 THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS IN *OS DEGRAUS*, BY  
 AUGUSTO SOBRAL

O TEATRO PORTUGUÊS E A DIALÉTICA DO  
 ESCLARECIMENTO: O MITO DE PROMETEU EM *OS  
 DEGRAUS*, DE AUGUSTO SOBRAL

Agnaldo Rodrigues da Silva<sup>1</sup>  
 Adilson Vagner de Oliveira<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a discussion on the resignification of the myth of Prometheus, in order to articulate a study of the play *Os Degraus* (1964), by the Portuguese playwright Augusto Sobral. In this direction, we aim to focus on the Portuguese scenic production of the 1960's, as well as the path of this myth over the centuries, from the vision built on the metaphor of fire that, mythologically, saved the world from darkness, an artifice to represent the human ignorance in a particular period of human history. A meaningful play of the modern Portuguese drama, *Os Degraus* is a scenic text which reaffirmed the commitment of Sobral to substantial analysis of society in times of political crisis, leading to the stage new philosophical and sociological projects.

**KEYWORDS:** Modern Portuguese Drama; Myth of Prometheus; Augusto Sobral; *Os Degraus*; Drama and Politics.

**RESUMO:** Este texto apresenta uma discussão sobre a resignificação do mito de Prometeu, a fim de articular um estudo da peça teatral *Os degraus* (1964), do dramaturgo português Augusto Sobral. Nessa direção, coloca-se como foco de investigação a produção cênica portuguesa da década de 1960, bem como o percurso desse mito ao longo dos séculos, a partir da visão construída sobre a metáfora do fogo que, mitologicamente, salvou o mundo da escuridão, um artifício para representar a ignorância humana em determinado período da história humana. Peça significativa da moderna dramaturgia portuguesa, *Os degraus* é um texto cênico que reafirmou o compromisso de Sobral com a análise substancial da sociedade em tempos de crise política, levando aos palcos novos projetos filosóficos e sociológicos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Moderno Teatro Português; Mito de Prometeu; Augusto Sobral; *Os degraus*; Teatro e Política.

- 1 Professor at *Universidade do Estado de Mato Grosso* – UNEMAT and Member of Academia Mato-Grossense de Letras/Brazil. Post-doctor in Literature with researches in Comparative Literature, African Literatures and Portuguese-Language Drama.
- 2 Professor at *Instituto Federal de Mato Grosso*, Master in Literature. Doctoral student at Universidade Federal de Pernambuco and Member of the research group in Studies of Art and Comparative Literature/UNEMAT/CNPq.

## **The updating of the myth through time: from Prometheus to Prometheus**

*Os Degraus*, a play of the modern Portuguese drama, recovers innovatively the myth of Prometheus. Ancient myth that dwelt classic works of Attica, the Prometheus character is built by Augusto Sobral in a Lusitanian context, where the author deeply analyzes the society, the politics, the economy and the very human relationships, confronting capitalism and socialism; the first (savage capitalism) is articulated in a negative perspective, once it would dehumanize people; while the second (enlightening socialism) might become the escape valve of many compatriots who remained oblivious to the sociocultural problems of those hard years.

We discuss here some aspects such as: the power that corrupts people, the struggle for mass awareness and the weakness of the modern man facing the challenges that traced the political and cultural paths of a certain historical period in Portugal, the late 1960's. Sobral developed a technique to modernize the myth without interfering in the fundamental essence, or even in the impotence in the face of a greater power. In this direction, *Os Degraus* is a play that brings a Prometheus discontent with the destiny of man, but unable to change it, because the modern mythical hero loses the superhuman capacity, a characteristic that in Greek tragedy distinguished him from the ordinary men and used to approach him to divinity.

Understanding the symbols presented on the scenic text of Sobral, as well as the elements of characters development, time and space, requires the viewers a historical, sociological and philosophical knowledge, allowing them to analyze the meanings that this myth acquired through time in a move that makes them look back, in an attempt to understand the present. Therefore, the necessity to revive the essence of the myth of Prometheus, by contacting its origins, some versions and sequences, this motion from today to yesterday.

### **In the perspective of the myth: a journey in time**

Prometheus, one of the Titans, is the son of Iapetus and the Oceanid Clymene or, according to others, of Nereid Asia, or even Themis, the older sister of Saturn. Prometheus, whose name in Greek means "foresight", was not only an industrious God, but also a creator. God of fire and brother of Atlas, the Titan appears in Greek mythology as the inventor of the first human civilization. It is closely linked to the world creation myth and, therefore, his love and devotion to the men led him to

challenge the greatest Olympian gods, including Zeus. A first sequence of the myth recounts that after the ordering of chaos, which contained the seeds in latency of all beings and organisms that exist today, separated the land from the sea and the sky of both. Then the fish took possession of the sea, the birds of the air and the beasts of the land.

Something was still missing, someone endowed with rationality who could take care of all these creations: the man was created. It seems that in the land, so recently separated from the sky and the sea, there was a rest of very few heavenly seeds. Prometheus took some of this earth, mixed with water, turned into clay, shaped the man in the image and likeness of the gods. Prometheus made man erect so that, unlike the animals that when walk they contemplate the earth, could contemplate the sky and be aware of the existence of his creator.

Prometheus belonged to a race of giants that inhabited the earth before the creation of man. According to one the versions, the origin of the myth, he and his brother Epimetheus were tasked with creating man and ensure to this rational animal and to the irrational ones the necessary abilities for their self-preservation. Epimetheus should create and Prometheus ought to examine in order to give the final finish. Victoria (s/d, p. 148) states that in creating man from land limo, Titan steals the fire of the sky, to cheer him up, blown in the nose, brought him to life.

In this task, Epimetheus assigned to all beings specific skills such as: courage, strength, swiftness, sagacity, finally, varying capacities to the most different genres. However, when it was the time to assign the skills to man, he had already spent all the resources of prodigality and then resorted to Prometheus, his brother that was helped by the goddess Athena (goddess of wisdom), climbed the sky and lit a torch in the sun, offering fire to the man who would become a superior being to the others.

[...] with this gift, the man assured his superiority over all animals. Fire supplied him with the means to build the weapons to subdue the animals and the tools to cultivate the ground; to warm the home, in order to become relatively independent of climate, and finally create the art of minting coins, which increased and facilitated trade (BULFINCH, 2003, p. 20)<sup>3</sup>.

A second version of the myth can be found in the writings of Commelini (2000, p.100-101), where the author reports that after Prometheus had taken from the sun the piece of divine fire, Zeus, angry by the

3 All the references have been translated by the authors



audacity of the Titan, ordered Hephaestus to forge a woman who was endowed with all perfections. This woman was Pandora that was presented at a meeting of the gods, where Athena dressed her in a robe of effulgent dawn, she covered her head with a veil and flower garlands that placed under a golden crown. The gods, admiring this new creature, wanted to give her something. It was in this spirit of admiration that

Minerva<sup>4</sup> taught her the arts that suit the female as the art of weaving, Venus spread around her the enchantment, along with the restless desire and tiring cares. The Graces and the goddess of Persuasion wore her neck with necklaces of gold, Mercury gave her the word with the art of conquering hearts through insinuating speeches. Finally, after all the gods had given her gifts, she was named Pandora (from the Greek *pan*, all, and *doron*, gift). Jupiter gave her a well-sealed box to be sent to Prometheus (COMMELIM, 2000, p. 101).

That was the plan of revenge against Prometheus, but the suspicious Titan did not receive Pandora and warned his brother about the possible pitfall. Not listening to the fraternal recommendations, Epimetheus (which means “thinks too late”) took Pandora as his wife. Curious, Pandora opened a fatal box (known as “Pandora’s box”, where the gods kept evils and virtues), letting out all the evils and all the crimes that spread throughout the world. When trying to close the box, Epimetheus only managed to retain hope. So even when there is nothing left to man, one always sees the thread of hope.

A third version of the myth says that Epimetheus had in his home a box in which he kept numerous evils of body and spirit, he did not use them at the time he was creating the mankind and the other things of the world. Pandora, the first mortal woman, endowed with curiosity, which was not peculiar to man, wanted to know what was inside the object. One day uncapped it, freeing everywhere the plagues that immediately reached the man who started feeling rheumatism and anger in the physical body, in addition to envy, spite and revenge, in other words, diseases of the soul.

One of the most acceptable versions mentions that Pandora had been sent by Zeus with good intention, in order to make the company the man who sexually felt alone. The god of gods gave her as a wedding gift, a box, in which each of the gods had deposited a good with the shape of virtue. Pandora, moved by curiosity, opened the box and all the goods escaped except hope.

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4 Roman name for the goddess Athena

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That is the most acceptable version, mainly because it sees some logic, that is, how come hope would be mixed with other evil things as the other versions tell us? For this latest version, the evil had already been spread around the earth and the Pandora's box contained the virtues forgotten by man. When trying to close the box, only hope got stuck and it is given to man in moments of need. This discussion reminds us of Mata (2004, p. 39) who interprets the metaphor "Pandora's bag" as "something that under seductive appearance, beneficial, may be the origin of many evils."

In Stephanides' version (2001), Pandora was not bad, but was instrumental for Zeus to punish mankind. Therefore, he endowed her with immense curiosity. Prometheus warned Pandora several times to never open the vase given by Zeus, because of the unknown content. She could not take the eyes off the intriguing object and wondered repeatedly why she could not open it; until the day when curiosity took her over. As she opened the vase, she shout out when terrible monsters started leaving, such as, the evil, hunger, hatred, disease, revenge, madness, among others. Horrified, not knowing what to do, she sealed again the object, holding the only spirit that could not leave: hope. Everything happened the way Zeus had planned, so all evil had settled where the man lived. Prometheus lived with it all, in an infinite anguish, and, according to some versions, the event contributed to him to come out in defense of men during the war with the gods.

A final version of the myth, which we present in this text, narates that at a certain moment in human history Zeus realized that human beings became increasingly bold as to challenge the gods. In a failed attempt to exterminate the human race, he removed all the light of the world and kept it on a torch, throwing humanity to the darkness of ignorance. There was no science, philosophy or religion, as if the existence had suddenly returned to chaos.

Prometheus, pitying the human race, climbed the sky and steals a spark of light, returning the potential of enlightenment to the world. As punishment, he is chained in the Caucasus, a high mountain of Scythia, where every evening a bird of prey (vulture) used to come to devour his liver. There he was to remain for thirty thousand years if Hercules, son of Zeus, did not set him free from this suffering. This is the sequence that serves as the matter to the tragedies of Aeschylus, writings that form the trilogy *Prometheus Bound*, *Prometheus Fire-Carrier* and *Prometheus Unbound*. In the first book of this trilogy, the performance begins with

Prometheus being chained on the mountain, following, a posteriori, of a long tour with the intention of explaining the reasons for the punishment of the Titans, when Bia and Cratos characters play long dialogues. Subsequent books, many parts were lost, so that there are gaps in the sequence of events, but preserved the essence of the text.

### **The visit to the Bible of Humanity: a mythical version**

After this last sequence reported previously, a truce between gods and men was established. Bulfinch (2003) tells it properly and clearly, starting from the version that Pandora's Box had only virtues, among which hope had been cloistered. During this period, the world was populated of innocence and happiness, until progress began to corrupt the man: first the Golden Age, when truth and justice reigned, without the need for laws or judges to repress or punish. Humanity was a paradise, because it did not know weapons of war and the land offered everything that men needed to sustain themselves.

The author also states that little by little things had been changing and humans corrupted their virtues. During the Silver Age when things were no longer easy. The spring was divided into seasons. For the first time, the man felt cold, heat, and had to build shelters to hide from the rain and sun. It was necessary now planting to harvest at certain seasons, so farmers had to sow and plow the land to produce.

After that there was the Bronze Age, a period when there was unrest and the man began to think of war to defend territories, but he was not entirely bad, because he had not thought of conquering what belonged to the other. All he had was the product of his work, because life still remained within the limits of a geographical area, in a community.

Finally, the Iron Age. Bulfinch (*ibidem*) also reported that this was the worst period, because the crime flooded every corner of humanity. Thus, modesty, truth and honor left the heart of man, leaving in its place, fraud, cunning, violence and greed. The man was not satisfied only with the land, also wanted the sea, and to do so he knocked down trees to build boats. He not only wanted to defend the own territories, but also thought of conquering what was not his, taking from the weaker their lands and their belongings. Beyond what was on the land and sea, he wanted to grow under the earth, extracting their minerals and metals, with which he built more weapons. In this direction,

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[...] The guest did not feel safe at his friend's home; the husbands and in-laws, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives could not trust each other. The children wanted the death of their parents in order to inherit their wealth; family love fell down. The ground was wet with blood, and the gods abandoned one by one (Bulfinch, 2003, p. 23).

Outraged, Zeus united the gods in a council, in which they decided to exterminate the human race to rebuild everything. *A priori*, the god wanted to send fire on the earth, but fearing that the sky could be reached, he gave up. He decided to flood the earth. Having the help of the gods, the winds were released for pushing the clouds to be compressed and cover the sky with a profound darkness. Soon, the sky cried liquid torrents that flooded crops and drove people from their homes. The waters of the rivers, seas and oceans were loose and everything submerged. Everything was sea, sea without beaches<sup>5</sup>. All men were exterminated, except Deucalion and Pyrrha, the couple who survived, for being at the peak of Parnassus, the highest mountain. They were from Prometheus's race, one of the few who still feared and yielded worship the gods and so they were spared in order of Zeus. Thus, as Prometheus had molded the primitive man, his children Deucalion and Pyrrha would have the task of renewing the human race.

Bulfinch (*ibid*) also reported that when the gods can contemplate the earth again, the waters were all gathered in their places, Deucalion and Pyrrha saw a temple devastated by mud. They asked the oracle to clarify on what they should do to mitigate this dire situation, when they heard a voice saying that they should leave the temple with their heads covered and unfastened clothes, throwing back the mother's own bones.

Deucalion, moved by cunning, interpreted the oracle and understood that the mother of us all is the earth and its bones were the stones. So they veiled their faces, loosened their clothes, picked up stones and threw back one by one. Here they produced the miracle of new human generation. As they fall to the ground, the stones softened and took a roughly form, similar to the human. The humidity and the slime turned into flesh, and the stony part was transformed into bone. The stones thrown by the hands of Deucalion turned into men, the ones thrown by Pyrrha took shape of women. From this sequence, the humanity has survived until our generation.

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5 For some authors, Bible appropriates this version to narrate the Noah's Ark

### ***Os degraus: construction of a mythical hero***

*Os degraus* is a play produced during a period of intense oppression of the government system in Portugal. This contesting example of modern Portuguese dramaturgy established a new form of drama production, by updating the myth, discussing a calamitous situation of the hard years, when the country and its colonies suffered the consequences of Salazar's dictatorial government. The play features an aesthetic that reinvigorates the fundamental elements of modern dramatic genre, especially the innovation of scenography and the contestation of bourgeois drama.

To Silva (2008), the result was a scenic text of extreme harshness against the contradictions of the capitalist bourgeoisie, and especially the resistance against censorship that had been forged by a repressive and violent government system. The play *Os degraus*, a remarkable modern reading of the myth of Prometheus, is a rich text on human substrate and because of that censorship did not allow to be performed, for its highly political and ideological content. The play was performed many years later, when the regime collapsed and democracy was established, whose socio-political tension can be seen in the fragment:

Prologue: I do not fear if they arrest me, they hit me, they interrogate me. Nothing frightens me. The only thing that frightens me is not knowing if it is worth going through all of this. It frightens me to think that I can be killed and the world continues the same as it has always been.

1 Companion: [...] This is not a theater. No one comes to this world to die of eyes on target, with musical background. Have you not realized that? We might die like millions who die in the world every day, just because they did not find conditions to survive, with awareness of it or without it.

Prologue: But our death may have a meaning, just because we have a conscience. Such meaning, with background music as you said. A death like this can be worth a life in another way, a life without any meaning. I will never get to know what politics really is, but I feel in me the strength to do all revolutions (SOBRAL, 2001, p. 135-136).

The text therefore adheres to the central theme that Sobral worked strongly (positively) on his plays, namely, human solitude in a sociopolitical context troubled. Taking as reason an ancient myth, he discusses the need for freedom of conscience in contact with philosophy, science, religion and their relations with other fields of human experience, in order to achieve an enlightening dialectics. It is in the face of this set of human

experiences that the characters throw questions to the audience: “Who is wrong in this world? [...] Where can be the justice of all this? Must there be justice?”<sup>6</sup> These statements look for answers, in order to aware narrow-minded individuals, unable to perceive their own doldrums before social events, as we can identify in “we all want to be devoured by this flame that is the consciousness of man and it goes beyond all of us, and once it is unleashed it shows to our eyes, the pain or the coldness of skepticism”<sup>7</sup> (SOBRAL, 2001, p. 139).

When Sobral creates the protagonist of *Os degraus* that is named as Prometheus, the playwright gave him the metamorphoses that the myth has undergone over all these centuries, until he could get to a character that was the symbol of the struggle against tyranny and constituted power. The relationships built in the text force the appearance of man, but not any man, it is the man-hero, the man-god, but he can also weaken, a cracking/rupture of the figure of the mythical hero of classical literature. This humanization of the modern hero can be analyzed in dialogues that indicate a man who can succumb to the social and existential problems, as we can see in the dialog:

1<sup>st</sup> Companion: There are better ways to win the fight than ours. Each one can count only on himself, and win by any means. We all had the freedom to choose. Of course. We all know where it comes from. Prometheus! Here we are with Prometheus around. As many metaphors that you can do, the type [man] and all like him will never be Prometheus. There is no longer Gods and Men. There are people. People who want to live, and if it is in the pain for the fire of the Gods. (Ironic). Prometheus is only a name that will kill you.

Prologue: Shut up! You know perfectly well that the type [man] gets irritated when he is called Prometheus.

1<sup>st</sup> Companion: [...] He and Prometheus never seemed so much. The son of a Supreme Judge, in jail, for mass awareness.

Prologue: Prometheus spreading the fire of abode of the Gods.

1<sup>st</sup> Companion: We expect him not to be tied to any rock and no eagle comes to eat his liver.

Prologue: Prometheus, bringing the fire of the gods to run the world in the consciousness of men. To make men (SOBRAL, 2001, p. 137-138).

6 T.N. “Quem é que está errado neste mundo? [...] Onde pode estar a justiça de tudo isto? Será forçoso que haja justiça?” in the original text.

7 T.N. “Todos queremos afinal ser devorados por essa chama que é a consciência do homem e passa além de todos nós, e uma vez desencadeada nos despeja, pelos olhos dentro, a dor ou a frieza do cepticismo”.

Historical phenomena turn to be around these transformers men whose genius is unappreciated, misunderstood and sometimes persecuted by those in power. We can understand this in a particular moment of the play, when the Prologue character refers to Prometheus as a personality that is making men, whether desperate or happy, but he makes men because he enlightens them. We might remember Brunel (1998) when he says that Prometheus is the symbol for revolt in metaphysical and religious order, mainly because he incarnates the refusal of the absurdity of the human condition. There are expressions like “Promethean man” or “Promethean humanism” a defiant attitude and contestatory of traditional values that have, since Romanticism to the present day, preserved the need for the break of the new with the old.

The Prometheus of Sobral is the typical sympathetic man who, at certain times, approaches the common individual who relentlessly pursues an ideology and departs from that unbeatable hero of the classic epics. Perhaps this approach does not matter, because the end reached is the symbol of collective struggle in both cases, a hero who represents a community. Consciousness and unconsciousness create windows in which they develop the plots, whose heroes or antiheroes are powers to be imitated, becoming paradigms of humanity. The myth brings elements that can explain incomprehensible phenomena to man, and maybe that’s why Sobral created a main character conflicted with his own existence, not to deny the divinity, but against the imperfect form of use of established power. In this sense, the character Father, a Judge of the Supreme says: “I’ve always lived ... for the great politics ... What will happen to our doctrine power on the day ... beyond the pure sense of law and... justice (The reasoning stops him, and he suddenly exclaims). I live for superstructures”<sup>8</sup> (SOBRAL, 2001, p. 145).

Silva (2008) points out that the human being is the product of the city in *Os degraus*, as Prometheus was built along these lines, that is, the man-city that dialogues with the viewer on social, political, economic and existential crisis, a plateful to make this play an undeniable way of writing tragedies in modern times. Concepts of tragic life and tragedy of life take shape, as the needs of a time when capitalism dictates the rules in force in the social conventions. Among the ironies and feelings of cowardness, Sobral’s Prometheus asks the audience that “do not miss the high point

8 T.N. “Vivi... sempre para a grande política... Que será do nosso poder doutrinador no dia em que ... para além do sentido puro da lei e da ...justiça (O raciocínio como que lhe para, acabando por exclaimar súbito) Vivo para as superestruturas”.



of the show. The moment when the two driving forces of the tragedy. The poignant scene between father and son. The duel of the sheriff with the tramp of the prairies. Emotion! Suspense”<sup>9</sup> (SOBRAL, 2001, p. 164).

There is a repulse for the constituted system, for this form of the class structure: oppressors and oppressed. The refusal to integrate the capitalist system prevents the protagonist to find alternatives that are guided by the construction of inner values, leading him to socio-existential crisis. These issues therefore push the character to an inner struggle that ends in a self-annihilation. The solution to this problem is tragic, the death, as Prometheus cannot be consolidated in a petty and selective society, as well the chorus announces: “Man, as an enemy of the man, dominate and impose a sense of man to your fellow. Man that crushes everyone who wants to trespass the limits you own put to yourself because of a reality that you accepted”<sup>10</sup>(*ibid*, p. 167).

Truth becomes abstract, disconnected from the acts, preventing Sobral’s Prometheus to reach the hierarchy of the classic epic heroes, heroes who never abandoned the battlefield. Maybe all this has been one of the reasons why the criticism has always stressed the playwright’s proposal: “a bitter view of the world, the individual ineptitude to transform it, one placing aside and resigning the intervening capacity”<sup>11</sup> (FADDA, *apud* SOBRAL, 2001, p. 20, preface). In this direction, Silva (2014), in the book *Do texto à cena*, points out that the myth in literature organizes contexts that reveal the crises of man in the face of the own existence, in which he considers himself a god in an attempt to overcome the limits imposed by nature or the social environment. In the case of Attic tragedy, that overcoming was right; however, in modern tragedy, frustrations are common because the hero always succumbs to obstacles.

*Os degraus* is a play that reaches high levels of an engaged artistic discussion, a notable exemplar of Portuguese modern tragedy, whose discussion records significant moments of the country’s dictatorship in those 1960’s. Besides, it is a rich material to discuss art and society, from a debate on the understanding that the human being has in the world, taking

9 T.N. “Não perca o momento mais alto do espetáculo. O momento das duas forças determinantes da tragédia. A cena lancinante entre o pai e o filho. O duelo do *sheriff* com o vagabundo das pradarias. Emoção! Suspense!”

10 T.N. “Homem que sendo inimigo de homem, domina e impõe um sentido de homem ao teu semelhante. Homem que esmaga todo aquele que queira passar acima da medida que tu próprio lhe impuseste por força de uma realidade que aceitaste”.

11 T.N. “Uma visão amarga do mundo, a ineptidão do indivíduo para transformá-lo, colocando-se à margem e prescindindo da sua capacidade interveniente”.



the works of literary and artistic creation as a representation of historical periods. Among the many Prometheus, Sobral's exposes the weaknesses of man and social fragilities, before the resistance of the conventions and the ruthless force of savage capitalism. Fragmentation and loneliness are the characteristics of these new heroes, products of an era of scientific and technological imperialism, they feel empty of human substrate.

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